



How Gratitude Beats Materialism

By Jason Marsh, Dacher Keltner | January 8, 2015 | 2 Comments

New studies reveal how to deliberately cultivate gratitude in ways that counter materialism and its negative effects.

Now that we're a week into 2015, most of us have come down from the buzz of the

holidays and returned to life as normal. And after spending weeks, if not months, obsessing over the gifts and goodies that awaited us in December, some of us may feel a post-holiday hangover, where we realize that we're probably no happier than we were before we got that new flat screen TV or cappuccino maker.

This won't come as a surprise to anyone tracking the science of happiness, which suggests that material things are unlikely to boost our happiness in a sustained or meaningful way. In fact, research suggests that materialistic people are less happy than their peers. They experience fewer positive emotions, are less satisfied with life, and suffer higher levels of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse.



Why is this the case—and how can we avoid falling into the unhappiness trap of materialism before the next holiday season rolls around?

One answer has been emerging from social science: Cultivate a mindset of gratitude. Gratitude is proving to be about much more than the occasional "thank you." Instead, the principles of thanksgiving give rise to a unique way of seeing the world.

The latest evidence suggests that, rather than simply being about good manners, the emotion of gratitude might have deep roots in humans' evolutionary history, sustaining the social bonds that are key not only to our happiness but also to our survival as a species.

Materialism can get in the way of our deeply rooted propensities for gratitude. Fortunately, new studies are documenting how to deliberately cultivate gratitude in ways that counter materialism and its negative effects. Researchers have identified some of the most effective techniques for fostering gratitude, including ways that people can spend their money to actually boost their gratitude—and thus their happiness.

The perils of materialism

You know that social scientists are concerned about something when they create a scale to measure it. In the early 1990s, researchers Marsha Richins and Scott Dawson developed the first scale to measure materialism rigorously. According to this scale, people are materialistic to the extent that they place acquiring possessions at the center of their lives, judge success by the number and quality of one's possessions, and see these possessions as vital to happiness (for instance, they agree with statements like "My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have").

For more than two decades, studies have consistently found that people who score high on Drs. Richins and Dawson's scale score lower on just about every major scale that scientists use to measure happiness.

For instance, a 1992 study by Drs. Richins and Dawson themselves, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, found that more materialistic people feel less satisfied both with their lives as a whole and with the amount of fun and enjoyment they get out of day-to-day life. More

recently, a study by Todd Kashdan and William Breen, published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, found that materialistic people experience more negative emotion (such as fear and sadness), less positive emotion, and less meaning in their lives.

In trying to understand why materialism undermines our pursuit of happiness, scientists have zeroed in on the fact that more materialistic people report particularly low levels of gratitude.



Earlier this year, Jo-Ann Tsang of Baylor University and her colleagues surveyed 246 undergraduate students to measure their levels of materialism, life satisfaction and gratitude. Their results, published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, show that as materialism increased, feelings of gratitude and life satisfaction decreased. Further analysis revealed that materialists felt less satisfied with their lives mainly because they were experiencing less gratitude.

Why are gratitude and materialism opposing forces in the mind? According to Robert Emmons, a pioneer in the study of gratitude and a psychology professor at the University of California, Davis, gratitude involves acknowledging the good things in our lives—from the beauty of autumn leaves to the generosity of friends to the taste of a good meal—and recognizing the other people or forces that made them possible. Gratitude helps us savor the good in our lives rather than taking it for granted and yearning for what's next.

One of the traps of materialism, by contrast, is that it locates the sources of happiness in shiny new things—indeed, research suggests that materialistic people have unrealistically high expectations for the amount of happiness material goods will bring them. When those expectations inevitably go unmet, they invest their hopes for happiness in the next thing, and the thing after that, on and on in a fruitless pursuit.

“A relationship-strengthening emotion”

Practicing gratitude means appreciating the good that other people bring to our daily lives—which is why Dr. Emmons refers to gratitude as “a relationship-strengthening emotion.” And strong relationships, research suggests, are one of the most important ingredients to a happy life.

A leading expert on the social benefits of gratitude is Sara Algoe, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In one study, Dr. Algoe and her colleagues tracked men and women in long-term romantic relationships for two weeks, asking them to report each day whether their partners had done anything nice for them and how much gratitude they felt toward them as a result. When participants felt grateful for their partner's kindness on one day, they felt significantly more satisfied with their relationship on the next. And the partners of these newly grateful men and women felt more connected to them and more satisfied with their relationship than they had on the previous day.

How Does Gratitude Affect Romantic Relationships?



The social effects of gratitude extend well beyond those closest to us. Philosopher Adam Smith knew this long ago, arguing in his “Theory of Moral Sentiments” that gratitude is the glue that holds communities together. Roughly 250 years later, a clever experiment by Monica Bartlett and David DeSteno backed him up. Drs. Bartlett and DeSteno induced gratitude in some of their study participants by having someone help them with a sudden computer problem (which the researchers actually caused). Soon afterward, the participants encountered someone who needed a hand. Those who had received help themselves devoted significantly more time to helping others than did the non-grateful people. When we receive a gift, gratitude motivates us to pay it forward.

Findings like these suggest that gratitude might have deep evolutionary roots. After all, the bonding and reciprocity promoted by gratitude are exactly the kinds of behaviors that evolutionary biologists see as essential to the survival of the more social, mammalian species. Indeed, in his thorough analysis of what he calls the “food-for-grooming service economy” among chimpanzees, primatologist Frans de Waal of Emory University has found that chimps remember the specific individuals who have groomed them in the past and later return the favor by sharing more food with them. Dr. De Waal sees these grooming-for-food trades as elementary forms of primate gratitude.

Further evidence for the evolutionary roots of gratitude comes from the study of human touch, one of the earliest modes of human communication. In a collaboration between one of us (Dacher Keltner) and Matthew Hertenstein, who is now on the faculty at DePauw University, two participants sat on opposite sides of a large barrier; when one of them stuck her or his arm through a hole in the barrier, the other person attempted to communicate emotions by briefly touching the stranger’s forearm. After each touch, the touchee guessed what emotion the toucher was trying to convey. People were remarkably accurate in identifying touches of gratitude, suggesting that we have strong instincts to communicate and understand that emotion. The language of gratitude is pre-verbal.

Given these deep roots of gratitude, it should perhaps come as no surprise that it is associated with striking health benefits. In many studies, by Dr. Emmons and others, grateful people report fewer symptoms of illness, are less bothered by aches and pains, enjoy better sleep quality, and have stronger immune systems. This was true not only among people who were naturally grateful but among those whom the researchers prompted to feel more gratitude over time. As they became more grateful, their health seemed to improve.

How Does Gratitude Affect Health and Aging?



And new research by [Wendy Berry Mendes](#), an associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco, has found that people who have high levels of gratitude show lower resting blood pressure and are less reactive to stressful events; when Dr. Mendes analyzed their blood samples, she found that they showed fewer risk factors for cardiovascular disease—they had higher levels of good cholesterol, lower levels of bad cholesterol—and lower levels of creatinine, indicating strong kidney function.

Inducing gratitude

Our evolved capacity for gratitude by no means guarantees that we'll reliably practice gratitude—sometimes culture gets in the way. Jo-Ann Tsang's work suggests this is exactly what happens when people develop more materialistic values: Their feelings of gratitude get edged out.

The good news, though, is that the relationship between materialism and gratitude can run in the opposite direction. A [2009 study](#) led by Nathaniel Lambert, now of Brigham Young University, found that inducing gratitude in people caused a decrease in materialism. Dr. Lambert and his colleagues were able to increase gratitude in their participants by instructing them to focus on appreciating the good things they had been given in life, then write about what came to mind. But is it possible to cultivate gratitude outside of the controlled setting of a university laboratory?

The answer is yes. In fact, identifying effective gratitude practices is one of the most exciting areas of inquiry in this new science.

Perhaps the most widely tested of these is the "gratitude journal," in which people write down five things for which they're grateful. In some studies, they journal on their own every day for two weeks; in others, they write only once a week for six weeks or longer.

It's a simple exercise, requiring as little as a minute or two each week. Yet this basic practice significantly increases levels of gratitude, makes people happier (25% happier than people who don't keep a gratitude journal, according to one study by Dr. Emmons), improves their health and even encourages them to exercise (1.5 hours more per week than non-journalers, Dr. Emmons has found). These benefits have been observed even among people in trying circumstances, including people with neuromuscular disorders.

Another research-tested way to cultivate gratitude is to write a "gratitude letter." This involves writing a letter to someone whom you have never properly thanked, in which you identify

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precisely what he or she did for you, how his or her actions shaped your life, and why you are grateful to him or her. Research suggests that you enjoy an extra boost of gratitude—and happiness—if you actually go and deliver your letter in person, reading it aloud to your benefactor.

The gratitude journal and letter have both proved effective among children. But psychologists Jeffrey Froh, of Hofstra University, and Giacomo Bono, of California State University, Dominguez Hills, have recently gone one step further, developing an entire curriculum for teaching gratitude to elementary school students. Through the curriculum, children reflect on a nice thing someone else did for them, the cost that person incurred through his or her kindness, and the good intentions that motivated the gift.

When Drs. Froh and Bono taught the curriculum to students for just half an hour a week for five weeks, they found that it increased gratitude and other positive emotions for at least five months afterward.

A final suggestion for building gratitude comes from new research by Thomas Gilovich, a professor of psychology at Cornell University. For years, Dr. Gilovich's work has shown that people are happier when they spend their money on experiences, like a vacation or a dinner out, than when they spend on material things, like a new TV. Now he has found that the same goes for gratitude: People report feeling more grateful for experiential purchases than for material purchases.

Cultivating Gratitude in a Consumerist Society



What's more, when Dr. Gilovich and his team analyzed the reviews that people leave on various consumer websites, they found that people generally indicate more gratitude when writing about an experience (e.g., on Yelp or TripAdvisor) than when writing about a material good (e.g., on Amazon).

This offers an important lesson about gratitude, and an important lesson for how we spend our money year-round. It suggests that spending money isn't necessarily antithetical to gratitude and happiness. What matters is how you spend it—and that you take a moment to give thanks for what you have.

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